

Louisiana's Adaptive Response to COVID-19

Louisiana Housing Corporation

Special Achievement: COVID-19 Response

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When March 2020 brought the nationwide shutdown, it was a time of panic and unease. Like many, the Louisiana Housing Corporation found themselves in a position unable to carry out normal operations. As the agency worked to implement a plan to overcome the challenges of quarantining and social distancing, LHC was also facing the rising concern of health experts' predictions that the Louisiana homeless population would be at an increased risk during COVID-19.

LHC launched two responses to COVID-19, the remote virtual inspection process and the homelessness housing initiative, that allowed the agency to continue business operations while ensuring team and customer safety as well as protect the statewide homeless population from acute vulnerability with exposure to COVID-19, respectively. Both efforts by LHC proved overwhelming success during an unprecedented time and presented an easily replicable structure for future adoption by other agencies throughout the country.

Remote Virtual Inspection Process

Traditionally, LHC team members travel across the state to conduct home inspections in-person. When COVID-19 led to a nationwide shutdown in March 2020, a core team of leaders at LHC came together to formulate a plan for how to continue operations while ensuring safety for all and without a loss in efficiency. Within a short period of time, LHC was able to effectively implement a virtual process for home inspections by proxy.

With the virtual inspection process, a proxy, whether it be a tenant, landlord, property manager or maintenance person, serves as the eyes and ears for the certified LHC inspector of record, who would be virtually present for the inspection via smartphone or tablet. This allowed for the inspection process to continue, with no in-person contact and guaranteed safety for all parties. This was especially necessary for the elderly population LHC serves due to the higher risk from COVID-19 transmission.

Throughout the entire inspection process, LHC works to ensure that the proxy not only follows the appropriate steps, but also has a sound understanding of the purpose and objective. The proxy signature is required on all necessary forms prior to inspection to ensure document review. This also gives credibility to the integrity of the inspection process. For the inspection, the qualified LHC inspector has the software pulled up and virtually present the entire time through video to see everything that is occurring in real time. Through video, the inspector is able to instruct and educate the proxy on where to go throughout the unit and what to look for. As such, no aspects of the inspection process haven been lost through the remote virtual method.

Taking Initiative for Proven Success

When restrictions started to rollout across the country, LHC realized quickly that they would need to take initiative, as work could not falter. Once the agency received the waiver from the US. Department of Housing and Urban Development confirming the ability to incorporate remote video inspections into daily practices, they had already laid the groundwork and were able to immediately begin working in a new, compliant work environment. LHC was already using electronic tablet software for their inspections, so they were able to effectively incorporate existing resources into their adaptive and responsive method for home inspections. With the established objective of continuing routine

inspections without halting operations, LHC's virtual home inspection process proved effective, and even led to greater efficiency within agency operations.

In third quarter of 2019, the LHC inspection team performed 320 in-person unit inspections. In third quarter of 2020, amidst new regulations and challenges, LHC's innovative response led to the group performing 972 remote virtual inspections. In the same quarter between 2019 and 2020, the agency saw a 303.75% increase in unit inspections using a totally new and adaptive method.

Further, while in the past, agency inspectors would have to sometimes spend an entire day traveling to and from inspection sites, now through virtual work, travel time is completely cut out of the equation, allowing for LHC team members to spend those hours dedicated to getting work done, doing more inspections, and increasing business efficiency, while also saving money on travel. Over one quarter, the inspection team was able to save \$11,650.33 on fuel.

In addition to increased work productivity, LHC also experienced a notable amount of positive customer feedback for their virtual remote inspection work. Customers were relieved to find that they were able to conduct their inspection virtually, not having to worry about social distancing or potential exposure. With this, customers were happy to serve as proxy inspectors to guarantee safety for all and appreciated the seamless nature of the new process. To date, over a year into the pandemic, the LHC team has been able to increase efficiency and maintain business operations, and they have been able to do so without a single team member contracting the coronavirus.

LHC was recently contacted by HUD regarding best practices, lessons learned and widespread process integration in agencies throughout the United States for their impressive remote virtual inspection methodology. With an increase in number of inspections by over 300% in an assured safe environment, the Louisiana Housing Corporation considers its COVID-19 response to be a very successful one. This process for conducting inspections is already being implemented throughout the country in other areas, and LHC continues to share best practices and lessons learned for continued adoption of remote virtual inspection.

Pandemic to Permanent Housing: Seizing an Opportunity in Preventing a Crisis

State health experts warned that Louisiana's homeless population would be at increased risk for COVID-19 morbidity and mortality due to lack of access to hand-washing facilities, lack of space to socially isolate, and pre-existing comorbidities. Health experts also warned that the risk to the state's homeless population represented a general public health emergency insofar as it created a large potential vector for transmission. LHC and public health officials agreed that traditional congregate emergency shelter was not an effective or sufficient response.

Before the Mardi Gras COVID-19 spike, LHC convened the statewide Continuums of Care (CoCs) to answer a simple, direct, and unprecedented question: "What actions would it take to protect Louisiana's homeless population from COVID-19, and how much would it cost?" LHC identified the solution as widespread non-congregate shelter focused on Louisiana's urban areas with rapid bridges to permanent housing. After assessing the available infrastructure to create sufficient NCS beds, LHC identified the potential for a unique public-private partnership. As the pandemic accelerated, Louisiana's tourism industry was left with thousands of empty hotel rooms. LHC could support one of Louisiana's largest and

hardest hit industries at a critical moment while creating enough shelter for its entire unsheltered population.

Between March 2020 and the present, LHC created more NCS beds, primarily in hotels statewide, than the total unsheltered population counted during the January 2020 PIT Count; depopulated 89% of NCS beds; relocated 51% to permanent housing destinations; created and then significantly expanded a statewide eviction prevention program; and prevented Louisiana's unsheltered homeless population from being more severely impacted by COVID-19 than the general population, as health authorities warned was likely. While LHC created those plans before federal resources were available, all of these activities were funded by FEMA or HUD, and all of them are replicable in any state in the country.

Achieving Strategic Objectives

LHC's COVID-19 response plan is replicable by any state in the country. It was developed to be funding agnostic, and each of its pieces could be funded by many different local and federal funding streams. Moreover, each piece could be implemented independently of each other and at different funding levels, either in response to disasters or to the ongoing need for shelter and housing. The three objectives: creating non-congregate shelter sufficient to accommodate the state's entire unsheltered population; rapidly transitioning the NCS population to permanent housing; and providing homelessness prevention opportunities statewide, including rental assistance, to prevent more people from entering the homeless services system all proved successful.

Louisiana's NCS is successful largely because it remains task-oriented: providing shelter, ensuring people could live comfortably in a shelter, and transitioning them out as quickly as possible. NCS was incredibly successful at preventing the spread of COVID-19 within the state's homeless population, evidenced by no outbreaks at the NCS facilities and little transmission across the homeless population, with a very low mortality rate in homeless populations compared to projections.

PH was successful because, to the maximum extent possible, LHC and the CoCs connected participants to the 'right resource.' In some cases, that meant connecting participants to resources with suites specifically designed for their subpopulations, like Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) for veterans, Runaway and Homeless Youth Transitional Living Program (RHY-TLP) for youth, and Housing Opportunities for Persons with AIDS (HOPWA) for people living with HIV/AIDS. In others, it meant connecting people with long periods of homelessness and high acuity with permanent supportive housing or connecting them with RRH and bridging them to PSH through the local Coordinated Entry System. ERAP (formerly LERAP) continues to be a success primarily because it is widely advertised, available and accessible to people across demographics due to multiple application routes, including a participant-facing web portal and phone applications, and it focuses on providing the 'right resource' to tailored to individual needs. While affordable housing remains a long-term barrier, sufficient shelter, housing voucher, case management, and wraparound services funding resulted in creating more than 2,200 NCS rooms over 13 months, an 89% depopulation rate for NCS, and 51% exit to PH rate using primarily existing resources, due to an unprecedented level of federal funding.

Louisiana Housing Corporation's quick and adaptive response to COVID-19 not only proved success, but also established best practices that other state agencies can hopefully adopt and implement.

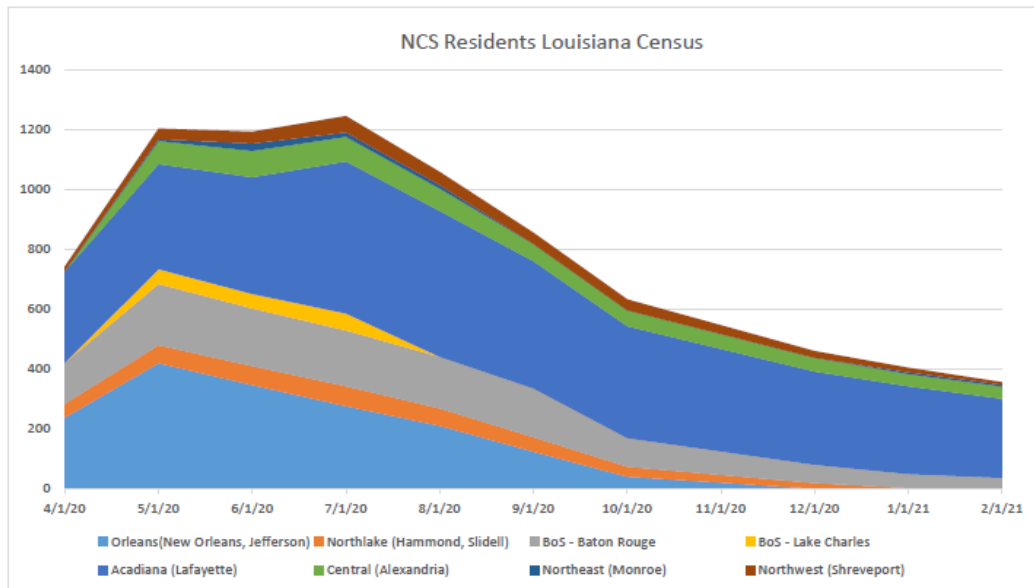
Supplementary Materials

Photos of the LHC inspection team conducting remote virtual inspections.



Graph of Non-Congregate Shelter Populations across Louisiana from April 2020 – February 2021

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Widespread media coverage detailed LHC’s work to move the homeless into non-congregate shelter and then to seek permanent housing solutions.



New Orleans homeless move into to hotel to slow coronavirus spread

By: Danny Monteverde
 WWL Eyewitness News
 MARCH 26, 2020

<https://www.wwltv.com/article/news/health/coronavirus/new-orleans-homeless-move-into-to-hotel-to-slow-coronavirus-spread/289-ed4af8e2-5b4d-40e1-b468-32a706b3aca0>

Story transcript:

NEW ORLEANS — Workers in protective suits and face masks loaded dozens of homeless onto RTA buses Thursday morning as crews worked quickly to clean up the ground under the Claiborne overpass at Canal Street.

The goal: getting as much of the city's homeless population off the streets as the number of COVID-19 cases continues to grow.

"This has been a massive humanitarian airlift," said Matha Kegel, with UNITY of Greater New Orleans, a homeless advocacy organization. She said the homeless population is one of the most at-risk groups. "Homeless people are three times more likely than the general population to die of Coronavirus," Kegel said. "They have high rates of disability and chronic disease and they tend to be an older population."

As the morning went on, the buses next pulled up at Duncan Plaza, across from City Hall, to begin moving the homeless who live there.

A similar program happened after Hurricane Katrina at the same exact spot and 280 people were put into hotels.

"We did it more slowly than today. We did it over the course of a month. But we were amazed because at that time our outreach team was new" Kegel said. "Every single person -- every single person -- went with us."

The homeless will be housed at the Hilton Garden Inn, a 155-room hotel, on Gravier Street in the Central Business District.

Adam Turni, the general manager, said it's a win-win for the hotel, which can stay in business, and the homeless population.

"We can do our part to remove these persons off the street and slow the spread of the virus and get through this together," he said.

They'll be housed and fed there for the next 30 days using a mixture of federal, state, local and philanthropic funds.

"The end goal of this, again, slow the spread and at the end house these people in some sort of facility for a longer-term solution," Turni said.



150 more homeless people given hotel rooms in New Orleans to slow spread of coronavirus

By Tristan Baurick
NOLA.com STAFF WRITER
MAY 7, 2020 AT 5:00 PM

https://www.nola.com/news/coronavirus/article_670af832-909b-11ea-b5f6-c3849cda5c1c.html

Article text:

The number of homeless people receiving temporary housing in New Orleans hotels grew to more than 430 with the leasing of about 150 more rooms this week.

City and state officials [began placing homeless people in hotels](#) to stem the spread of the [coronavirus](#) in late March. About 190 people were moved from homeless encampments to the Hilton Garden Inn on

Gravier Street on March 26. Two weeks later, about half the occupants were [moved to the New Orleans East Quality Inn](#) off Interstate 10 after concerns were raised about health and safety issues at the Hilton.

On Thursday, about 158 homeless people were picked up in city buses outside the New Orleans Public Library's main branch on Loyola Avenue, from beneath the Pontchartrain Expressway and at other locations. Most were taken to two hotels that homeless advocates declined to name out of respect for the occupants' privacy. City officials say relocating is voluntary.

In addition, [Unity of Greater New Orleans](#), a homeless services organization, has housed about 80 homeless people in a dozen small hotels.

"To have 428 people taken off the street since the pandemic started is a relief," said Martha Kegel, Unity's executive director. "This is the first step. The intent is to move them into apartments, so now the real work begins."

The state paid \$289,000 to lease the Hilton and \$257,000 to lease the Quality Inn for one month, according to documents obtained through a public records request. The leases were renewed through May but likely at a lower cost because fewer rooms were required. At least 10 of the hotel occupants have found permanent housing, a city spokesman said.

State officials expect nearly all the costs, which have not yet been tallied, to be reimbursed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Homeless advocates say the hotels offer an [especially vulnerable population](#) the means to self-isolate during the pandemic. They have access to beds, bathrooms and three meals per day.

A [recent study](#) indicated homeless people are more likely to be hospitalized and up to three times more likely to die if infected by the coronavirus. The University of Pennsylvania-led study recommended that the New Orleans area, which has about 1,250 homeless people, would need 700 hotel rooms or other housing units.

Unity determined that about 72% of New Orleans' homeless population meets federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention criteria for high risk of serious illness from the coronavirus.

"Because of their ages and medical conditions, they're particularly fragile," Kegel said.

Volunteer medical staff [raised alarms in early April](#) about conditions at the Hilton. State-hired contractors and security guards managing the hotel were dismissive or ignorant of widely-known guidelines for curbing the contagion, including regular hand-washing, use of masks and gloves, social distancing and cleaning of door handles and other surfaces, according to members of the New Orleans Medical Reserve Corps.

State and city health officials said many concerns were alleviated after half the Hilton's occupants were moved to the Quality Inn.

Kegel said Unity has become more involved in helping to manage the hotels. The group is providing case managers to help hotel occupants find permanent housing and other assistance.

"And we're making sure everyone's been schooled on social distancing and everyone's been given masks," she said. "The whole purpose for everyone working on this is to protect people from coronavirus."



Homeless residents moved to temporary hotel housing in midst of coronavirus outbreak

By Sophie Kakasove

The Lens

MARCH 26, 2020

<https://thelensnola.org/2020/03/26/homeless-in-new-orleans-cleared-from-encampments-moved-to-temporary-hotel-housing-in-midst-of-coronavirus-outbreak/>

Article text:

Thursday morning under the Claiborne Avenue overpass started like any other: full of people sleeping in tents and sleeping bags. By mid-morning, though, the underpass was empty. Sanitation workers in white hazmat suits swept the cement, while others loaded tents and trash bags into garbage trucks. The people who had slept there last night hauled what was left of their belongings onto four RTA buses. Dozens more homeless people were moved from Duncan Plaza Thursday afternoon.

According to Martha Kegel, director of UNITY of Greater New Orleans, a homeless housing and services provider, they were headed to temporary housing in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

Under a city and state plan [reportedly being finalized this week](#), many of New Orleans' homeless will be housed for the next 30 days at The Hilton Garden Inn on Gravier Street in the Central Business District.

Kegel said the move is a huge step towards addressing the needs of homeless people during the pandemic. "It's a miracle, it's a huge operation," she said, watching people board the buses at Duncan Plaza, in front of New Orleans City Hall. "This is just a wonderful day because finally the homeless people have a home to 'stay home' in."

Kegel has been advocating for public officials to take such action since March 16, when she was contacted by doctors at the University Medical Center. According to Kegel, they said they were getting a large number of homeless patients with symptoms typical of COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. She was concerned that the disease would spread rapidly among the vulnerable population.

"[Hotel rooms] are really the only option that allows them to isolate individually and allows them private bathrooms with which to maintain sanitary conditions," she said. "How do you stay at home if you don't have a home?"

The rooms are being paid for using a combination of federal, state, local and nonprofit funding, WWL-TV reported. President Donald Trump's national emergency declaration on March 13 granted Federal Emergency Management Agency regional administrators the authority to approve requests for "non-congregate sheltering," making additional funds available for hotel rooms.

The cost, or the extent, of the housing operation was not clear by Thursday afternoon. Neither Gov. John Bel Edwards' office nor New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell's office responded to requests for more details. A spokeswoman for Cantrell said more information would be released today.

Public health officials and advocates across the country have [identified the homeless](#) — who tend to be older, sicker, and less able to maintain personal hygiene — as a population particularly vulnerable to contracting and dying from the virus. Their transience also makes them potential vectors for the virus, leading advocates to seek private hotel rooms as a necessary intervention. Kegel said that while many people who live on the street are unwilling to sleep in shelters, they tend to be amenable to private rooms.

Homeless advocates agree that the move is a crucial step, but say that it leaves many people underserved. "I think it's a huge underestimate of our homeless count. It'll make a dent but it's definitely not going to help everybody," said Sarah Parks, executive director of Grace At The Greenlight, which provides meals and other services to homeless people.

The state is taking additional measures for homeless residents with confirmed cases, closing Bayou Segnette State Park in Westwego to house homeless residents if they've tested positive for the virus. The state may also [soon activate the Ernest N. Morial New Orleans Convention Center](#) to house patients who no longer need to be hospitalized.

According to the Homeless Management Information System managed by UNITY, there were 451 people sleeping on the streets in New Orleans on Tuesday night. This doesn't include hundreds more sleeping in shelters, or people sleeping on couches, in cars, or in some other temporary arrangement.

Shelters and homeless service providers are meanwhile struggling to accommodate both surging numbers of people in need while maintaining safety with little space and little protective gear. Ozanam Inn reduced its number of beds this week from 96 to 52 in order to maintain six feet of distance between beds.

"We have had to turn away a lot of people for shelter," said Renee Blanche, director of development at Ozanam Inn. "There's not really anywhere to direct them to. There's not that many shelters that are open and the ones that are still active are at capacity, and at lesser capacity."

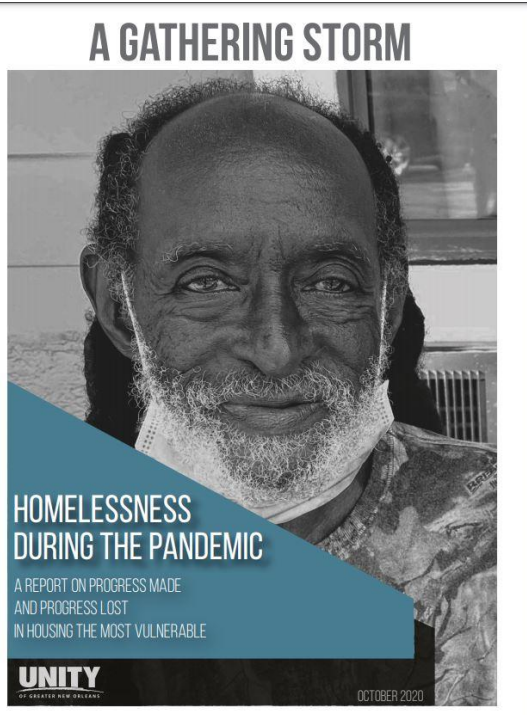
The shelter is still providing to-go meals to anyone in need and has been giving out on average double their typical number. Other facilities have seen similar increases. Grace at the Greenlight has been feeding an average of 150 people at every meal, compared with their typical 80-100. The line at meal times, which usually extends just down the block, now reaches back four or five blocks as people wait at cones spaced seven feet apart. The increased numbers are likely due to both rapidly growing unemployment across the city resulting from coronavirus-related layoffs and business closures, as well as the disruption of normal routine for unsheltered people.

"Good Samaritans used to be bringing food to people under the bridge, that's pretty much stopped," explained Kegel.

Covenant House, a youth shelter, is upholding its mission to turn no one away, and is now caring for 212 kids, surpassing its record high of 162. As a result, social distancing practices have been limited. "Six feet in a homeless shelter is just not possible. I don't have another building to move kids to," said Jim Kelly, director of Covenant House. The shelter has begun keeping doors open with door stoppers to minimize doorknob touching, has made curfew earlier, and has given kids more water in hopes that they'll use the bathroom and wash their hands more. But beyond that Kelly said there's little he can do.

"The numbers of what's coming our way scares me. We're a vulnerable population and I'm very concerned that we're going to get hit. I expect to get hit," he said. "We're doing a lot of praying."

LHC partners, such as Unity of Greater New Orleans, documented the success of the effort in the first year of the pandemic



**[Homelessness During the Pandemic:
A Report by Unity of Greater New Orleans](https://unitygno.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Gathering-Storm-October-2020-Report-on-Homelessness-During-the-Pandemic.pdf)**

This 16-page report from one of LHC's regional partners details the collaboration that helped move hundreds of New Orleans' homeless population off the streets and into safe, permanent housing when possible.

<https://unitygno.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/A-Gathering-Storm-October-2020-Report-on-Homelessness-During-the-Pandemic.pdf>